TRUSTAFRICA

CASE STUDY

FDK
Senegal

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Project Description

The FDK (Federation Dimbaya Kanyalen) project aims to raise reading outcomes by implementing a micro level reading skills acquisition approach, Stratégie Active pour la Réusite d'une Ecole Novatrice (SARENA), intended originally to be complemented by comparative data. The SARENA approach is designed for French speaking students in their first two years of primary school. SARENA uses a very global methodology, in that, it heavily features word shape and text memorization. Development of decoding skills is less stressed. For the sake of external relations, the district-level academic inspectorate received additional training and was made responsible for monitoring, despite its recognized inability to perform well in this capacity. FDK also features community/parental involvement through the acquisition and use of mobile phones to facilitate communication between teachers and parents. Other partners include the Bureau Artichaut of Dakar which provides training and materials for SARENA.

The implementation process includes background level research on the target area and individual students involved in the test group, acquisition of appropriate teaching/learning materials, teacher/director/monitor training, provision and training in the use of mobile phones for parent-teacher communication, classroom instruction monitored by IEF (Academic Inspectorate) and school directors, in-service training, periodic

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formative evaluations, end line assessment and analysis. It should be noted that math was dropped from the project goals due to lack of available expertise.

The SARENA approach was attempted by FDK two years earlier. However, that attempt was so poorly executed that the merits of the approach itself were not assessable. This first attempt was also poorly evaluated, giving the false impression that it had succeeded while the data showed that the approach produced equal, and in some cases less, increase in learning than did the control group.

This project ranks rather low on the use of best practices.

Project Implementation and Capacity Building

FDK technical capacity is low. Staff originally included an education specialist, but this individual was transferred to another project. Staff does not include an M&E specialist though one was to be hired. This

has led to a reliance on the input of the Bureau Artichaut and the TA technical consultant. The Bureau Artichaut provided adequate theoretical input to teachers and monitors but was very weak in practical training, leading to a severe deficiency in teacher practice. While not available to engage as a staff member, the TA technical consultant has invested considerable effort in the areas of program planning, reading skills acquisition training, classroom/teacher observation, in-service teacher coaching/training and M&E. TA's greatest contribution to FDK's capacity has been in establishing an expectation and appreciation for quality supervision of classes and teachers as well as for formative evaluation. FDK did not, however, implement well in these areas. FDK is a new subsidiary of Child Fund and the local management staff is less experienced.

Progress and the measurement

The original intention was to use a previous EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) baseline reading level of test and control classes to provide the grounds for comparison with an end line assessment and with a control group. Inadequate program execution and insufficient practical teacher training has compromised the reliability of program results such that any outcomes cannot now be plausibly related to the SARENA approach as it was intended to be implemented. This was further complicated by the late arrival of teaching/learning materials, two months after the start of the program. These materials were not available for teacher training. Though a teacher/class observation form was conceived before the start of classes in November, it was produced and distributed late to monitors. Teacher weaknesses have been noted during both IEF and TA consultant monitoring visits. Though students had indeed memorized texts, they were unable to decode words or syllables from that same text when presented in isolation or in context. In-service teacher training and periodic formative evaluation sessions were then arranged to address this problem. By this time, however, many teachers had abandoned the SARENA approach and resorted to more familiar practices.

Results

Due to insufficient practical initial teacher training by the Bureau Artichaut, the late arrival of teaching/training materials and the school inspectors' strike, the results of an end line assessment would not have been useful, and so this was cancelled. Also, the mobile phone company was not able to supply the records of mobile phone use by teacher and parents, leaving no documentation of parent-teacher interaction. Apart from parent interview results, it will be difficult to demonstrate that mobile phone use facilitated teacher/parent communication.

Despite these shortcomings, an evaluation of this year's results could have been misleadingly positive when compared to the typical poor practice in control schools. The FDK project could have delivered equal, if not superior, results as compared to those of the typical public school, though not plausibly related to the merits of the SARENA approach.

Mitigating circumstances and their effects on results

The initial teacher training lacked enough practical instruction for effective classroom delivery of the approach. Teachers could not familiarize themselves with the teaching/learning materials because the materials were not available during the teacher training. These resulted in a low level of teacher proficiency and confidence.

FDK's lack of education expertise reduced their ability to diagnose and remedy shortcomings in training and classroom practice. This, combined with the late and insufficient use of teacher/classroom observation tools, resulted in the late detection of inadequate teacher practice. The subsequent in-service teacher training succeeded in improving teacher practice but was too late to compensate for lost learning time.

Because FDK also lacks M&E expertise, evaluation of the earlier/first attempt to implement the SARENA approach was outsourced to 'experts'. The evaluation results were misleadingly positive, requiring reinterpretation by the TA technical consultant before they were shared with stakeholders. FDK was to engage an M&E expert for this second attempt but was unable to do so.

The involvement of the school inspectorate was originally positive with designated inspectors attending the teacher training. Due to a long-standing working relationship with the TA technical consultant, the inspectors had been more diligent in their monitoring responsibilities than could otherwise be expected. Several months into the academic year, however, the inspectors went on strike, effectively bringing any M&E activities to an end.

The choice of language of instruction and of language in which reading skills were to be acquired did not match the linguistic competencies of the teachers or of the students. SARENA was designed for French speaking pupils and teachers, so in this environment does not allow for the pedagogical benefits of using a familiar language shared between students or teachers, nor the advantage of using familiar words to teach phonetic awareness. Despite FDK's and the inspectorate's interest in using the local national language, phonetic awareness is taught using unfamiliar French rhymes or images of equally unfamiliar French words. Also, the level of French vocabulary in the teaching/learning materials and in the teacher's instructions to pupils exceeds the French language ability of the typical pupil and the typical teacher. Though FDK did a thorough background level study, the linguistic mismatch between the pupils and the approach was not given sufficient attention. Monitors observed that pupils were unable to follow classroom instructions given in French, leading to significant dysfunction followed by unplanned marginally effective use of the local language.

Lessons Learned

- Results cannot be plausibly related to the effectiveness of the innovation when the innovation is poorly implemented.

- Education and M&E expertise should be assured from the outset of the project, provided either through staff or outsourcing. Loss of expert staff should be resolved at the earliest opportunity.

- Lack of attention to linguistic realities can negatively impact program effectiveness. Language use should be included in the background level study and considered when choosing a pedagogical approach, the language/s of instruction, and the language in which reading is first acquired.

- Provision of adequate teaching/learning materials during teacher training is essential to assure teacher performance and correct use of materials later in classrooms.

- Quality practical teacher training should occur before classes begin, and continue periodically throughout the year in order to assure effectiveness. Insufficient training has to be addressed at the earliest opportunity.

- Comparison to a learning outcome norm might not be as informative as comparison to a learning standard. In this case, SARENA, despite its own shortcomings, may compare favorably to the learning norm in control classes even though it delivered results below the minimum desired level standard. The favorable comparison is due more to the shortcomings of the control classes than to the superiority of the SARENA approach.

- The implication of public school inspectors can be beneficial when they are trained and committed to program implementation. The co-occurrence of both of these conditions is infrequent.

- Despite the provision of quality materials to each individual pupil and teacher, those materials may be of marginal effectiveness if pupils and teachers cannot use them effectively. Pupils struggled to find places in their books when asked to turn to a certain page and when asked to find a certain paragraph or example on that page, resulting in significant loss of time. This skill needs to be intentionally taught, otherwise writing on the board or the use of manipulables is more effective.

Scaling

In order to determine the potential of scaling up this innovation, the SARENA approach will need to be evaluated on the basis of its own merits apart from the inadequate capacity of the implementing partners. While the approach appears to be theoretically sound from a global reading approach perspective, it is impractical in this test environment to use only French, a language unfamiliar to pupils and poorly mastered by teachers, as the language of instruction and as the language in which reading skills are to be acquired.

The SARENA approach would be of interest to MoEs and NGOs concerned with French reading skills acquisition among learners already functional in oral French. Yet, even in such a favorable environment, the FDK bureau would lack the capacity to execute the present program, much less an expanded program, and so should not, at their present level, be considered as a potential upscaling partner. Child Fund, being the parent of FDK, may be interested in developing FDK'scapacity. The regional and district-level school inspectorates are happy to participate in any upscaling that may occur if their financial needs are met, but they do not have the capacity to implement the present or an upscaled project.

Preliminary Recommendations

I would not recommend upscaling or continuing the SARENA approach in this environment, unless important adjustments were made to account for the lack of French proficiency among pupils and teachers.

If the capacity of the FDK bureau is not significantly reinforced, I do not believe that it will be able to effectively execute the SARENA approach in this or in any other linguistic environment.

Given the deficiencies in organizational capacity and the linguistic mismatch, I would not recommend this project for upscaling.